

## **Power Up, Winnetka! – Early Years**

Most accounts of Winnetka's power plant focus on the colorful characters and great battles waged to preserve it for 115 years. But behind each of those headlines lies the *real* story of its success.

### **A Savvy Mechanic And A Telephone Company**

Take for instance the great Town Hall celebration in January 1900 when, with much fanfare, the first electric lights were illuminated. Most accounts focus on the moment as the new lights came on to gasps of awe.

But these were *not* the first electric lights in Winnetka.

The first were turned on by the tender of the steam-powered pumps at Winnetka's water plant. Every day, around the clock, he had to walk up and down a 40-foot staircase on the lake bluff to monitor coal fires that ran the pumps. With a mechanic's can-do initiative, he bought a small generator to connect to the steam-driven pumps. Then he installed lights for the walkway, pump house and water tower. So in the late 1890s, while homes of the village's most affluent residents were lit by gas, Winnetka's water plant quietly illuminated the future.

With this example, the village council laid plans to install a generator to power street lights, village buildings and future residential use. But cost for stringing wires throughout the village was prohibitive. So in franchise negotiations with Chicago Telephone Company the council succeeded in getting the company to pay to install utility poles for both telephone and electrical wiring. This made it possible for Winnetka to become perhaps the first northern suburb with electric lights and it explains why electricity and telephone service were introduced at the same time.

All was well for several years as more homes subscribed to electric service. But the first of three great battles would soon threaten.

### **Insull versus Lloyd and Ickes**

In the early 1900s two forces were at work that changed the landscape for municipal utilities: poor management practices and industrial consolidation.

This part of the story generally focuses on the three personalities who shaped the contours of the battle in Winnetka: Henry Demarest Lloyd, the fiery muckraking journalist who had promoted Winnetka's municipal utilities; Samuel Insull, the unscrupulous Commonwealth Edison magnate relentlessly driven to consolidate local utilities; and Harold Ickes, the future Secretary of the Interior and a Chicago lawyer who was a veteran of conflicts with Insull over Chicago gas rate hikes.

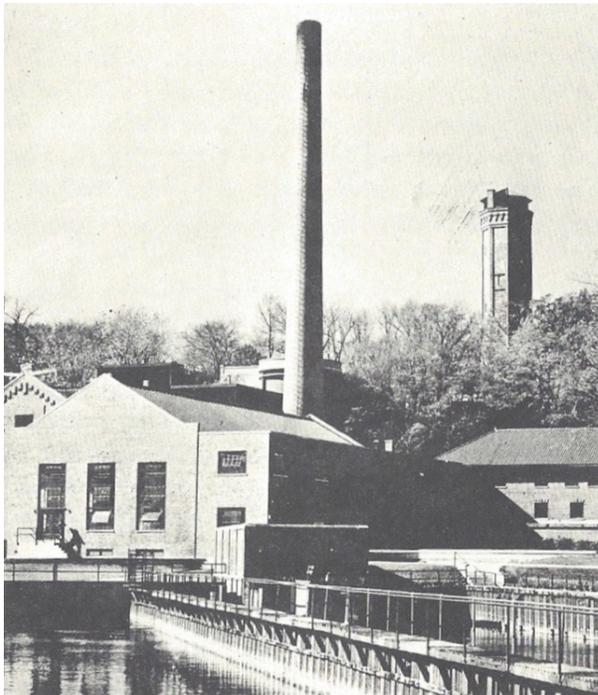
Although Mr. Lloyd had died in 1903, his spirit was invoked at a 1909 Winnetka town meeting where residents rallied to thwart the sale of this monument to his visionary legacy. Pressure to sell to ComEd undoubtedly lasted for years. Mr. Insull was known to be astoundingly persuasive. Perhaps it was the \$100,000 in cash he reportedly kept in his desk to sweeten negotiations. Few could withstand his corrupt tactics, the foremost being “Honest Harold” Ickes. Ickes is credited with protecting Winnetka from Insull’s pressure, but the efforts of Winnetka’s new superintendents of the Water and Light Plant should be given ultimate credit.

### **Survival Through Professional Management**

Charles J. Slauson, Winnetka’s chief engineer in 1972, had witnessed the downfall of many municipal electric utility monopolies: “The politicians would put their relatives on the payroll. Then they would vote to charge nothing during the month of December and January, because of Christmas.” Thus robbed of their reserves, there was no money for the huge capital investments necessary to keep a power plant in operation.

Winnetka’s first village managers were engineers hired primarily to put plant operations in order. Through their efforts Winnetka’s utility became a model of a well-run municipal utility and source of civic pride. Profits flowed to village coffers, paying for such projects as the new Village Hall in 1925. Residents paid lower electric rates and during storm outages Winnetka’s linemen were generally first to get service up and running.

By the 1920s, Winnetka’s power plant was a noted success. But the question of its value and viability would be raised again and again. Each time, it has been the ability to adapt to new demands that has ensured its continued success.



Winnetka’s Electric Power Plant succeeded in surviving the wave of electric utility consolidation that swept up other local utilities in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. PHOTO COURTESY OF THE WINNETKA HISTORICAL SOCIETY.